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# Abraham Lincoln

## Kentucky Mountaineer







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To my friend Hon. Daniel Fish  
William E. Barton

# ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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An address delivered before the faculty and students  
of Berea College, Berea, Kentucky,  
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By WILLIAM E. BARTON  
Author of "The Soul of Abraham Lincoln," "The Paternity  
of Abraham Lincoln," etc.

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Lives of great men encourage and assist us in proportion as we realize that these men have interests in common with ourselves. There could be little profit for us in the study of the biography of a person wholly beyond the sphere of our personal interest. But, even though a character in history is known to have lived in a land remote, and in a period far distant from our own, we are profited in learning about him if we can discover that his ideals, struggles, hopes and attainments had in them qualities and conditions akin to our own. We study a noble character, and it mirrors for us qualities of nobility in ourselves, qualities which we may hardly have known that we possessed. We read the life story of a hero, a patriot, a man truly great, and we say to ourselves that under like conditions we ourselves might have displayed qualities of heroism not wholly unlike those which he manifested. Although we recognize the degree of his greatness as being far above that which we at present can hope to attain, we are comforted and helped if we find his nobility to be the same in kind as our own best aspiration. High as he may tower above us, we still are at liberty to feel that the essential characteristics of his endeavor and success are akin to those which we ourselves possess. Even his faults and failures may help us, by giving us a larger sense of companionship with him. We do not greatly care for heroes inhumanly good. We want to feel that, however good and great a man may have been, his goodness and his greatness are such as we ourselves may aspire to achieve.

The Bible is an encouraging book, because, while it reveals to us a perfect standard of human life, and gives to us a long list of concise biographies of those who have aspired to attain that life, it faithfully records the motives and struggles and faults and failures as well as the virtues and successes



of those who participated in the struggle in which we have a share. The lives of these faithful men and women help us because we feel their kinship with ourselves; otherwise they would seem alien; if they did not seem too good to be true, at least they would appear hopelessly beyond our emulation.

No character in American history appeals to the young life of America more strongly than that of Abraham Lincoln. One reason for this fact is that we are constantly aware that his success and his goodness are such as belong to ordinary lives. At no point do we feel that he is incomparably above us. No group of young people in America has a better right to rejoice in the companionship of Abraham Lincoln than those who are residents of this, his native state, and those who, whatever the states of their birth, are students of Berea College. We have about us here the conditions that help us to realize our kinship with America's greatest American. I am calling to your mind today some of the outstanding characteristics of Abraham Lincoln, particularly those that identify him with the life of the southern mountains, and those that make their appeal to young people in process of securing an education.

Abraham Lincoln's ancestry was the common ancestry of the people of the Kentucky mountains. So far as we have been able to trace it through both lines of his descent, it was unmixed Anglo-Saxon. It is a mistake to suppose that the mountain people of Kentucky and adjacent states belong to a separate group of families than the people who inhabit the more fertile regions of the same states. If one should glance over a list of the early settlers in what are now the mountain counties of Kentucky, and a similar list of early settlers in what are now the Bluegrass counties, he would find the family names interchangeable to a very marked degree. There were not two distinct and separate kinds of people, who, coming from Virginia or the Carolinas, settled, one sort in the Bluegrass and the other in the mountains. Abraham Lincoln's grandfather, for whom he himself was

named Abraham, came to Kentucky from Virginia in the year 1780, and his three sons grew to manhood in what is now Washington county. One of them, Mordecai, removed to Illinois, another, Josiah, to Indiana, and the youngest, Thomas, to that part of Hardin county which is now Larue. There were not three separate Lincoln families, one in Indiana, one in Illinois and one in the hills of Kentucky; it was all one family. Furthermore, the pioneer Abraham Lincoln had a brother Isaac who lived in Tennessee and prospered and owned slaves; and another brother, Thomas, who located on a rich farm in the Bluegrass region, in Fayette county, a few miles from Lexington. The Lincoln stock was the same in all. Nothing could be more unscientific than to assume that the mountain people of Kentucky represent a distinct racial type. They are part and parcel of the common life of the southern central portion of America. The Lincoln family has been spoken of as belonging to the poor whites. They were white and they were poor, but they were not poor whites. The Lincoln family that lived in the hills of Hardin county was of as good blood as the Lincoln family that lived near Lexington. It was good, honest, American stock. At the time of the Revolutionary War the name Lincoln was almost wholly a Massachusetts name. The muster rolls of that colony contain numerous Lincolns; there were relatively few Lincolns in the other colonies of New England or the colonies further south. The family from which Abraham Lincoln descended was a branch of the Lincoln family that settled in Massachusetts in Colonial days, a family from which sprang governors of Massachusetts and commissioned officers in the Revolutionary War. That branch of the family that found its home in the Kentucky hills, was as Abraham Lincoln said, undistinguished, but it was not ignoble. It was a good, typical, American family.

Furthermore, the early pioneers did not understand as well as we understand the difference in value of Bluegrass as distinct from mountain land. They knew of course that



a rough mountain country was less favorable to agriculture than a region comparatively level; but they did not know the wide diversity in soil values between the limestone regions of central Kentucky and the less fertile regions of the hills. They drew no broad lines on their maps between mountains and Bluegrass. The lines that have been drawn by economic and social conditions are not likely always to remain as distinct as they have been. Thousands of mountain families, having prospered by the sale of their timber or their coal, have moved and are moving into the more fertile regions of the South. Socially and economically the valleys are being exalted and the mountains and hills laid low.

Furthermore, the conditions of pioneer life amid which Abraham Lincoln was born were the conditions which characterized the American frontier everywhere in timbered regions, particularly on the western side of the Alleghenies. These conditions linger longer in the mountains than elsewhere, and hence have seemed particularly to characterize the mountain region. But they were the conditions inevitable to the westward movement of American population.

It is well to have these things in mind, because when we think of Abraham Lincoln we do not regard him as representative of a section. We think of him as belonging to the whole life of America. This is as it should be, but insofar as the mountains of Kentucky had a life of their own, Lincoln was fairly representative of that life. He was born in a log cabin, with an earthen floor and a stick chimney. He was poor even as poverty was counted in the backwoods. The extent of that poverty has sometimes been exaggerated, but even if the Lincoln family had been as poor as it is believed to have been, it was poverty that carried with it no conscious degradation.

The school life of Abraham Lincoln was the typical school life of the early years of the nineteenth century. Edward Eggleston in one of his books has reminded us how frequently



the schoolmasters of that early day were strolling Irishmen. It is an interesting fact that Abraham Lincoln's first school teacher, Zachariah Riney, was Irish. For two brief periods in Kentucky and three in Indiana, Abraham Lincoln went to school. The schools which he attended in Kentucky were "blab" schools in which the students were required to study their lessons aloud. It may have been in part the result of this early training which induced in him the life-long habit of reading aloud, even when he was reading to himself. When writing, also, he was accustomed to pronounce each word as he wrote it. From this habit he never recovered. It carried with it a certain weighing of the words which he uttered. The method of instruction in schools of that day was certainly a faulty one, but the good there was in it Lincoln acquired and retained.

In those early schools almost the only textbook was the speller. A pupil was required to spell through the spelling book several times before he was expected to put words together. Lincoln became a good speller, a better speller than George Washington. Rarely did he misspell a word.

Lincoln learned to write slowly and carefully. He never became a rapid writer but he wrote a free, clear, legible hand.

He studied Pike's arithmetic and learned to cipher as far as the Rule of Three. This was as far as his public schooling carried him. But he was required to write essays and to commit declamations to memory, and he learned to read in the Kentucky Preceptor and in Lindley Murray's English Reader. The example of good literature which he found in these books were of permanent value to him. Although his attendance upon the five different schools aggregated less than one whole year, his schooling was not without profit of a substantial character.

The books in Lincoln's boyhood home were few. First of all was the English Bible. Besides this he had Pilgrim's Progress, Æsop's Fables, a history of the United States, the

Arabian Nights and Weems' Life of George Washington. Later he borrowed and read the statutes of the state of Indiana. In his later boyhood also he read a life of Francis Marion and a biography of Benjamin Franklin. Whether these books were selected by accident or special Providence, they could hardly have been better chosen. It has often been said that Abraham Lincoln borrowed and read every book within walking distance of his father's house. Perhaps this is true, but even so, the number of books he read was not great. He read a few good books carefully, and he mastered their contents.

There is no greater mistake than to confuse education with literacy. You perhaps know some good people in the mountains who can scarcely read at all but who have a considerable accumulation of knowledge and a very great store of true wisdom. In spite of their illiteracy they have acquired a very valuable education. On the other hand, the world is tolerably full of people who can read from three to nine novels a week and who neither are nor ever will be educated. No process could be invented more destructive of memory than the reading of innumerable books which one has neither the purpose nor the desire to remember. Abraham Lincoln read the books which he wanted to remember. He studied them and mastered their contents. It is better to read thoroughly a few good books than to make the mind a sieve by the indiscriminate reading of many books.

Chief among the books which formed the literary style of Lincoln was the English Bible. He himself has told a story concerning the use of the Bible as a textbook for reading in at least one of the public schools which he attended. He read the Bible and became familiar with it. It formed the background of his literary composition. It gave him his similes and characteristic forms of speech. He entered his series of debates with Stephen A. Douglas with the fundamental declaration quoted from the words of Jesus, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." His second



inaugural address, greatest and noblest of all of his literary and oratorical achievements, is like a chapter taken out of the writings of one of the old prophets.

Abraham Lincoln had a sense of the value of words. He chose his words carefully and with discrimination. He did not use a long word if a short one would answer the same purpose. On the other hand he did not cheapen his utterance by the use of words so commonplace that they failed to express his meaning.

Whatever else a student gets or fails to get out of a college course, he ought to acquire a good and adequate and accurate English vocabulary. There are young men who graduate from college who are incapable of writing a clear, simple, business letter, and who would be perplexed if they were confronted with the duty of sending to some young woman a simple and dignified invitation to a lecture or concert. There are young women who have college diplomas but cannot write a neat and legible letter, and who have no conception of the value of simple, clear, dignified English words.

Speaking at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln said, "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here." He was speaking of the men who fought at Gettysburg for the maintenance of the American republic. He felt that in comparison with their heroic deeds, any words of his must be unworthy and short-lived. He was greatly mistaken. Lasting as is the memory of the battle of Gettysburg, the address which Abraham Lincoln delivered on that battlefield will live longer than the record of the battle. The Gettysburg Address will continue to be printed and recited and loved a thousand years after the particular mention of the battle shall have disappeared from the briefer histories of the world. Words fitly chosen are among the most lasting of all human achievements. "The words that I speak unto you," said Jesus Christ, "they are spirit and they are life. Heaven and

earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

Abraham Lincoln's education taught him not only to read but to think; not only to write but to reason. He had by nature a logical mind, and he cultivated his powers of reason. He said of himself that when he was a boy it always annoyed him to hear anyone talk in language which he could not understand. He therefore determined when he began to speak in public to use language which the people could understand, language which clearly expressed his own thoughts. He said that he was never satisfied until he could bound a subject north, south, east and west. His clear language was the result of clear thinking.

Lincoln's education did not cease when he left school. When he was forty years of age he served one term as a member of Congress. There he learned something about a different kind of proof than any he had had occasion to employ in his law suits in Illinois. He heard the word "demonstrate," and did not know what it meant. He looked in the dictionary, and found that to demonstrate was to prove conclusively, and beyond the possibility of a doubt. He was told that that form of proof was to be found in the study of the higher mathematics. Lincoln's study of mathematics in school ended with the Rule of Three. At New Salem he studied surveying, where also he studied grammar. He had a very meager basis for a pursuit of higher mathematics, but he procured a book on logic and procured also a copy of Euclid. At the age of forty he mastered the principles of formal logic, and learned to demonstrate every proposition in the six books of Euclid.

In the summer of 1857 Lincoln was employed as council in the McCormick Reaper case. In some respects this was the most important case which up to that time he had tried. The trial occurred in Cincinnati. Lincoln's senior associate was Edwin M. Stanton. Stanton was much disgusted with Lincoln's appearance, and did not permit him to plead. Lincoln was very indignant over the treatment he received at



Stanton's hands. Stanton described him as "a long, lank creature from Illinois, wearing a dirty linen duster for a coat, on the back of which the perspiration had splotted wide stains that resembled a map of the continent." Lincoln, through a door slightly ajar, heard Stanton inquire, "Where did that long-armed creature come from, and what can he expect to do in this case?" Lincoln was deeply grieved. However, as he listened to the trial, he became convinced that there was a possible measure of justice in Stanton's rude decision. He noticed in the arguments of the council in that case a certain power of analysis and compactness of reasoning unfamiliar to him. "I am going back to Illinois to study law," he said. Thus did Lincoln learn from his own hard experience and mortification. How well he learned, and how magnanimously he displayed his character, is manifest in the fact that later he called to a position in his cabinet this same man Stanton who had so abused him.

Lincoln's education, far from being complete in the schoolroom, was continued through all the years of his life. The man who at the age of forty, and after having been a member of Congress, could go home and master the science of geometry, showed capacity for very severe self-discipline. The man who in 1857, having been a candidate for a United States senatorship and being then at the head of the bar in his own state, could accept a humiliation and an insult, but use it as the occasion for new study and a larger degree of culture, had in him qualities of perseverance and application worthy of consideration on the part of all men and women who wish to make the most of their lives.

Too often the educational process stops when the student leaves school. It was not so with Lincoln. His education was only begun in school. The whole process of his life was educational. It was the opinion of his law partner, Herndon, that Abraham Lincoln, whose development had been slow and continuous, had only entered upon the final stage of his intellectual growth when death overtook him. Herndon

believed, not that Lincoln had reached the zenith of his intellectual growth, but that if he had lived he would have been even a greater man, because he was continuously improving his mind and his power to use the attainments of which he was possessed.

From the time Abraham Lincoln began to go to school, his home in the Kentucky hills was in another part of the county of Hardin than that in which he was born, and one much nearer to the Bluegrass region. The Knob Creek farm was situated on the main thoroughfare between Louisville and Nashville. It was a rough road, but it was the main highway between the two cities. Lincoln's home was no longer in the heart of the back woods. It was in a place where travelers were passing every day. It was where there was more or less contact with the outer world. The Knob Creek farm of Thomas Lincoln was not more than two miles above the mouth of Knob Creek, and there the Bluegrass began. Knob Creek emptied into the Rolling Fork of Salt River which flowed less than fifty miles before it entered the Ohio river. He had growing contact with men and an avenue out into life. An important part of the education of Lincoln was that which was derived not from books but from men. Books are of very great value in the educational process but there never yet was a book as great as the man who made it. Men are greater than books.

Moreover it was largely through men that Lincoln acquired his later knowledge of books. It was Jack Kelso, a kind of wandering elocutionist, who recited to him the poems of Burns and Byron and some quotations from Shakespeare, and set him first to hearing and then to reading good poetry. It was Mentor Graham who first by personal association and then by books quickened within him the ambition to study grammar and surveying. Lincoln knew not only books but men. Throughout his life he increased his knowledge by increasing the range of his acquaintance with men.



We have been talking so long about the education of Lincoln, we may almost have forgotten that we set out to discuss his character in the light of his birth and training in the Kentucky mountains. But we have not forgotten this part of what we are proposing to do. The beginnings of all his course of discipline were in the log cabin home and the log schoolhouse in the hills of Kentucky. There began the process of education which made Lincoln the man he was. That process of education continued and was supplemented by instruction outside the mountains. The man who grew up through this process and became the leader of his nation was the same man whose life began and whose education received its original impulse in the Kentucky hills.

Let us now consider one or two respects in which Lincoln was especially well fitted for his life task because of his background of experience in the hills of Kentucky.

In the first place, Lincoln understood better than most men in public life in his day the extent to which the South possessed an anti-slavery element. We hear frequently of "the solid South." There never has been a solid South. Long before the war there was in every Southern state a strong abolition sentiment. The father and mother of Abraham Lincoln were married at a time when the anti-slavery sentiment in Kentucky was especially pronounced, and they belonged to a group of Baptist churches in which that sentiment was just then finding most emphatic utterance. Lincoln knew that the South was not solidly pro-slavery. He knew that even among the slave-holders of the South there were many who hoped for ultimate emancipation, and he knew that the South had a large number of white men who owned no slaves and whose own free labor was cheapened and degraded by competition with slave labor. This knowledge enabled Lincoln to approach the problems of slavery with far more of caution and effectiveness than some of the more uncompromising abolitionists.

Further, Abraham Lincoln knew what he could not well

have learned had he not lived in the south, that a very large section of the South was opposed to secession. Hence Lincoln was very patient with Kentucky when its governor in 1861 undertook to maintain an armed neutrality, taking no stand either for or against the Union. Lincoln was so patient that it was said of him in sarcasm that "Abraham Lincoln hopes he has God on his side, but feels that he must have Kentucky."

At the time it seemed preposterous that Lincoln should be as patient as he was with a state that refused to come out squarely and take its stand for the Union. But we can see from this distance that Abraham Lincoln was wise. The Albany *Evening Journal* on October 18, 1862, said:

"Kentucky even neutral would be worth 50,000 men to us; in her present loyal position she is potent almost to decide the fortunes of the war. Let us generously give her credit not only for what she has done, but for what she has prevented. Let us admit that without her aid today the southwest would be irretrievably lost to the Union."

It is not too much to say that the wisdom and patience which held Kentucky in the Union was the wisdom and patience of Abraham Lincoln. He understood the loyal South because his own life was part and parcel of it. He understood the non-slave-holding South because he had sprung from its loins. That understanding on the part of Abraham Lincoln came to him in part through his birth and residence in the hills of Kentucky and in part through that broad and intelligent sympathy which were native to him.

Statistics furnished by the War Department show that the five states of West Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina having a considerable mountain area, furnished to the Union a total of 195,557 soldiers; and that when this total is reduced according to the War Department's method to a three years' standard, the number of three-year soldiers furnished by the hill country of the South for the salvation of the Union reached an aggregate of



169,371. These were the men who held Kentucky in the Union. These were they who furnished 30,000 soldiers from east Tennessee when Tennessee as a state had seceded. These were the men who caused West Virginia to secede from secession and add a new star to the flag. This is something that could never have happened if a radical abolitionist had been in the presidential chair. It was Lincoln's knowledge of the south, the anti-slavery South, the loyal South, which made all this possible and effective. This much at least the hill country of Kentucky did for Abraham Lincoln, it taught him to be patient with the South till the South itself raised up a great army and helped to save the Union.

I know of no place where these things have better right to be said than here on the campus of Berea College. Berea has stood for the principles of Abraham Lincoln from the hour of its formation until now. Berea has always believed in the essential truths which Abraham Lincoln represented.

Furthermore, Berea believes, and the career of Abraham Lincoln demonstrates, that any form of education to be effective and produce its largest and best results, must include the culture of the heart and conscience, and produce a right attitude toward God and man.

If Abraham Lincoln were living now and were a young man in the hills of Kentucky who can doubt that he would strain every effort to become a student in Berea? Who can doubt that he would be in sympathy with everything for which this institution stands? Who can doubt that as a member of the student body of this college he would be one of the most loyal and earnest of his class, and, going forth, would confer high honor upon Berea College?

So long as the story of Abraham Lincoln rings true to the life of the young manhood and the young womanhood of Kentucky, no aspiring youth need ever be discouraged. So long as there is an institution like Berea College no worthy young man or woman seeking an education need ever be in despair. The spirit of Berea and the spirit of Lincoln are

close akin. Sam Walter Foss wrote in 1894 a poem on "The Coming American." In it he represented the genius of America as crying forth from its high mountains and its wide plains for manhood commensurate with its vast natural beauty and power;

"Bring me men to match my mountains;  
Bring me men to match my plains,  
Men with empires in their purpose,  
And new eras in their brains.  
Bring me men to match my prairies,  
Men to match my inland seas,  
Men whose thought shall pave a highway  
Up to ampler destinies;  
Pioneers to clear Thought's marshlands,  
And to cleanse old Error's fen;  
Bring me men to match my mountains—  
Bring me men!"

Abraham Lincoln and Berea College bring their two-fold answer to this challenge. Not without reason does this school proclaim itself as located in Lincoln's state, with an appeal to Lincoln's kin. The kin of Abraham Lincoln are located all over America. They belong to no one state; like Lincoln they belong to the common life of the nation. Berea sends forth tall men and strong men, beautiful women and true women, men and women of character and intelligence and common sense and simple goodness, men and women capable of leadership and destined to be leaders of America's greater future. Berea gazes in the face of Abraham Lincoln and into the faces of her student body and feels her own kinship with his high heart and heroic purpose. Then she gazes abroad upon her own campus and into her own classrooms and out into the mountains and upon the world, and says to America, "Here are the men to match the mountains."







